

**Statement of Congressman John Lewis
Floor Statement
National African American Museum History and Culture Act
(H.R. 3491)
November 18, 2003**

Mr. Speaker, I rise today in support of H.R. 3491, the National African American Museum History And Culture Act.

First, I would like to thank all my colleagues who have labored long days, weeks, months and even years to help realize a dream deferred for nearly one hundred years - the establishment of a national museum that documents the significant contributions of African Americans.

It has been my honor and pleasure to work with my dear friend and colleague from the state of Georgia, Rep. Jack Kingston. I also want to thank Chairman Ney and Rep. Larson for their commitment to making the National African American Museum a reality. I want to commend Reps. LaTourette, Norton, Don Young, and Oberstar. I also want to thank Senator Brownback and Senator Dodd for championing this legislation in the Senate.

The effort to create a National African American Museum has not been easy. It has been a

long, hard, and tedious journey. We are here today because Members, staff, and many supporters never gave up. They did not give out. They did not give in. When we began this journey, I often said that we must pace ourselves for the long haul. And we must keep the faith.

We paced ourselves for the journey. We diligently planted our seeds and tilled a sometimes hardened soil. And now the many supporters of the African American Museum can and will finally see the fruits of their labor.

The passage of this legislation will send a powerful message to supporters of the museum that we must organize and mobilize our efforts to raise the necessary money to build a National African American Museum.

The quest to build a national museum in Washington dedicated to African American history and culture on the National Mall dates back almost 100 years.

During every session of Congress for the past 15 years (1988), I have introduced legislation to establish a National African American Museum. The bill was passed in the Senate but not the House in 1992 and another bill was passed in the House but

not the Senate in 1994. Today, the bill will pass both Houses of Congress. The President will sign this bill into law. And we will build the National African-American Museum.

H.R. 3491 authorizes the establishment of a National Museum of African American History and Culture within the Smithsonian Institution. This legislation also directs the Smithsonian Board of Regents to designate a site for museum from a list of four specified sites--Monument Site, Arts and Industries Building, Banneker Overlook site, and the Liberty Loan Building.

I firmly believe that a National African American Museum should be in the front yard of the United States Capitol. The National Mall and the space around it is the front door to America. It is a symbol of our democracy.

Establishing a National African American Museum is our chance to take an important step to heal our nation's racial wounds. There is still a lot of pain and hurt that lies deep within the American psyche. We cannot run from it. We cannot push it under a rug or in a dark corner. We must face it if America is to become a nation that values liberty and justice for all Americans.

By establishing this museum and placing it on the National Mall, we will honor the legacy of African Americans and put it in a national light where it belongs.

African American history is an important part of our country, yet the vital contributions of African Americans go virtually unrecognized. Until we understand the full African American story, we cannot understand ourselves as a nation.

The African American story must be told. And a National African American Museum in Washington, D.C. is critical to telling that story.

For too long, African-Americans struggled in the shadows of America. As slaves, as sharecroppers, as the victims of Jim Crow, our ancestors lived in this great nation, but we were never quite part of it.

And while we were on the outside, always looking in, the rest of America took very little time to look at our lives - to know our history. This is the African American story that we must tell.

African-Americans have a history - a proud history - a history that needs to be told. A story that too often is not told. It is the story of great

individuals, such as Harriett Tubbman, George Washington Carver, Frederick Douglass and W.E.B. DuBois. But it is also the story of hundreds, thousands and millions of ordinary men, women and children struggling to survive in a land where they were denied the fundamental rights, dignity and respect that belong to all human beings. This is the story that we must tell.

We have come a long way in our quest to become one nation and one people. We have made such tremendous strides that the young people of today cannot imagine living in a country where they could not eat where they want to eat - or sit where they wanted to sit.

They cannot imagine a country where they could be beaten, shot or even lynched because of the color of their skin. Yet this was the country that I grew up in - and this is the history that we must tell.

And this story must be told here, in Washington, on the Mall - in the heart of the capitol of the United States of America. We have come from different countries. We have different cultures and different histories - but we are all Americans.

Here in Washington, on the Mall, the African-American Museum will stand by museums for Native

Americans, women, Hispanics and the Holocaust. They are a testament to our diversity and our common bonds. Men and women - Jew, Muslim and Gentile - the sons and daughters of slaves, and the sons and daughters of slave owners - we are all one people and one house. The American people. The American house.

The time is long overdue to recognize the contributions of one of the members of our American family. Mr. Speaker, the time is always right to do right. The cause is just, and the time is now. Let it be done on our watch. Let us create a National Museum of African American History and Culture.

I urge my colleagues to support H.R. 3491, the National African American Museum.